



Belarus

International Religious Freedom Report 2004

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government restricts this right in practice.

The status of respect for religious freedom continued to be poor during the period covered by this report. The Government formalized restrictions on religious freedom by passing a new law on religion in 2002 and signing a Concordat in 2003 with the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC), a branch of the Russian Orthodox Church, that many consider to elevate the BOC's status and provide the Church with privileges not enjoyed by other faiths. Authorities continued to harass other religions and denominations. The Government has repeatedly rejected the registration applications of other religious groups, including many Protestant denominations, the Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (BAOC), and some Eastern religions. Without registration many of these groups find it difficult, if not impossible, to rent or purchase property to conduct religious services. During the period covered by this report, the government-run media continued to attack non Orthodox religious groups. Despite continued harassment, some minority faiths have been able to function if they maintain a low profile, while others have openly declared their refusal to seek reregistration under the new religion law.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, anti-Semitism and negative attitudes toward minority faiths continued.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 80,154 square miles and its population is approximately 9,990,000.

The country historically has been an area of interaction, as well as competition and conflict, between Russian Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. The Government indicates that of all persons who profess a religious faith approximately 80 percent belong to the BOC and approximately 15 to 20 percent are either practicing Roman Catholics or identify themselves with the Roman Catholic Church. Between 50,000 and 90,000 persons identify themselves as Jewish. There are a number of Protestants and adherents to the Greek Rite Catholic Church and the BAOB. Other minority religious faiths include, but are not limited to: Hare Krishnas, Hindus, Baha'i, Seventh day Adventist, Old Believer, Muslim, Jehovah's Witnesses, Apostolic Christian, Calvinist, and Lutheran. A small community of ethnic Tatars, with roots dating back to the 11th century, practices Sunni Islam.

The country was designated an Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church in 1989, thereby creating the BOC. Under the leadership of Patriarchal Exarch Filaret, the number of parishes throughout the country had grown to approximately 1,290 by the end of the period covered by this report. There were approximately 400 Roman Catholic parishes in the country. The head of the Roman Catholic Church generally does not involve the Church in political issues. The cardinal has prohibited the display of all national and political symbols in churches.

It is estimated that approximately 120,000 citizens were considered to have Jewish 'nationality' near the end of the Soviet period in 1989, compared to between 50,000 and 90,000 at the end of the period covered by this report. At least half of the present Jewish population is thought to live in or near Minsk. A majority of the country's Jewish population is not actively religious. Of those who are, most are believed to be either Reform or Conservative. There is also a small but active Lubavitch community. In 2002, a Jewish community center in Minsk opened with assistance from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Agency.

Adherents of Protestant faiths, while still small, are growing in number. Since 1990 the number of Protestant congregations, registered and unregistered, has more than doubled. According to government and independent sources, it now totals more than 1,000. The two largest Protestant groups are registered under separate Pentecostal and Baptist unions. A significant number of Protestant churches, including charismatic and Pentecostal churches, remain unregistered.

There are a number of congregations of the Greek Rite Catholic Church, which once had a membership of approximately three quarters of the country's population but suffered from severe persecution under Russian and Soviet rule. Following the 1991 reestablishment of Belarusian independence, the attempt to revive the Church, which maintains Orthodox rituals but is in communion with the Vatican, has had only limited success.

The Muslim organization, the Spiritual Office of Muslims, was established in 2002 following a split within the Belarusian Muslim Religious Association, the main organizational body of the 30,000 Muslims in the country. Although the Spiritual Office of Muslims claims that 90 percent of the Muslim community belongs to this new Muslim organization, this claim cannot be confirmed.

Section II. Status of Freedom of Religion

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government restricts this right in practice. Although the 1996 amended Constitution reaffirms the equality of religions and denominations before the law, it also contains restrictive language that stipulates that cooperation between the State and religious organizations "is regulated with regard for their influence on the formation of spiritual, cultural, and country traditions of the Belarusian people." The Committee of Religious and Nationalities Affairs of the Council of Ministers (CRNA) regulates all religious matters in the country.

In 2002, President Lukashenko formally signed a new religion law into effect, despite protests from international and domestic human rights organizations, the European Union, and domestic religious groups, including Orthodox religious groups not affiliated with the BOC. The law recognizes the "determining role of the Orthodox Church in the historical formation and development of spiritual, cultural and state traditions of the Belarusian people" as well as the historical importance of the Roman Catholic Church, Orthodox Judaism, Sunni Islam, and Evangelical Lutheranism, groups commonly referred to as traditional faiths in society. Despite the fact that the law states its intention to guarantee religious freedom, the law contains a number of very restrictive elements that increase the Government's control of the activities of religious groups. It requires all religious groups to receive prior governmental approval to import and distribute literature and prevents foreigners from leading religious organizations, yet it denies groups the right to establish religious schools to train their own clergy. Further, the law established complex registration requirements that many religious groups, both traditional and nontraditional, have difficulty fulfilling. The new law requires all previously registered groups to reregister by November 2004 and banned immediately at the passing of the law all religious activity by unregistered religious groups.

The new law established a three-tiered structure of religious groups: religious communities, religious associations, and republican religious associations. Religious communities, or local individual religious organizations, must comprise 20 people over the age of 18 who must live in neighboring areas. To register, the community must submit a list of founders with their full names, places of residence, citizenships, and signatures; copies of their founding statutes; minutes of their founding meeting; and permission confirming the community's right to any property indicated in their founding statutes. For those communities practicing religions not previously known to the Government, information on their faith must also be submitted. According to the law, the Oblast Executive Committees (for those groups outside of Minsk) or the Minsk City Executive Committee handle all application requests. While the law denies communities the right to establish institutions to train religious clergy, it permits them to operate Sunday schools.

Religious associations are comprised of 10 communities, 1 of which must have been active in the country for at least 20 years and can only be formed by a Republican (national level) religious association. To register, associations must provide a list of members of the managing body with biographical information, proof of permission that the association can be located at its designated location, and minutes from the founding congress of the association. By law associations have the exclusive right to establish religious educational institutions, invite foreigners to work with respective religious groups, and organize cloister and monastic communities.

Republican religious associations are formed only when there are active religious communities in the majority of the oblasts in the country. By law all applications to establish associations and Republican associations must be submitted to the CRNA.

The law also requires the reregistration of all religious groups that were registered before the passage of the new religion law. While the reregistration process is not clearly defined in the law, in practice the process of reregistration is similar to the general registration process. Previously registered religious communities are able to be reregistered with a minimum of 10 members, as opposed to the 20 needed for registering a new community.

According to the CRNA, as of June, 80 percent of all previously registered religious communities have reregistered. This figure reflects that 95 percent of Orthodox communities and Roman Catholic communities, 80 percent of Jewish communities, 70 percent of Protestant communities, 54 percent of Greek Catholic communities, and 50 percent of Hare Krishna communities have successfully reregistered. The CRNA reported that the only group to be denied reregistration during the period covered by this report was a Muslim community that was unable to meet the required number of people needed to reregister a religious community. The denial was not challenged by the two main Belarusian Muslim organizations. Members of the Greek Catholic Church reported that as of June, local level officials were hampering efforts by Greek Catholic communities to reregister.

A concordat between the BOC and the Government guarantees the BOC autonomy in its internal affairs and the ability to fulfill all religious rights, as well as the right to consider itself in a special relationship with the State. It recognizes the BOC's "influence on the formulation of spiritual, cultural and national traditions of the Belarusian people." The concordat calls for the Government and the BOC to cooperate in implementing policy in various fields, including education, development and protection of cultural legacies, and security. Although it states that the agreement will not limit the religious freedoms of other faiths, the concordat calls for the Government and the BOC to combat unnamed "pseudo-religious structures that present a danger to individuals and society." During the period covered by this report, the BOC has signed cooperative agreements with the Ministries of Health, Labor, Emergency Situations, Culture, Defense, Education, Sports and Tourism, and the Academy of Sciences.

In March, the National Intellectual Property Center granted the BOC the exclusive right to use the word "Orthodox" in its title and granted the BOC the exclusive right to use the image of the Cross of Euphrosynia, the patroness saint of Belarus, as its symbol. These moves are seen as further instruments to solidify the standing of the BOC as the only Orthodox faith permitted to exist in Belarus. This move could further restrict the ability of other Orthodox faiths that are not under the jurisdiction of Moscow, such as the BAOC and the True Orthodox faith, to exist in the country.

The Government refers to groups that it does not consider to be traditional faiths as "nontraditional," and government officials and state media also widely use the term "sect" when referring to nontraditional religious groups, although it is not an official designation. The Government generally considers Protestant groups to be nontraditional, but it also considers some of them to be sects. As of January, there were 27 registered religions and 2,863 religious communities: 1,290 Belarusian Orthodox, 566 Evangelical Christian, 432 Roman Catholic, 270 Baptist, 63 Seventh Day Adventist, 43 Jewish, 27 Muslim, and 13 Greek Catholic. This figure also includes other religious communities belonging to several other religious groups. Some congregations are registered only on a local basis, which provides limited rights; only religious organizations registered nationally are allowed to invite foreign religious workers and open new churches. While all registered religious organizations enjoy tax exempt status, government subsidies are limited to the BOC. Protestant groups reported that tax authorities repeatedly fined them for their failure to pay taxes on assistance provided to destitute families and individuals. Government employees are not required to take any kind of religious oath or practice elements of a particular faith.

Under regulations issued in 2001, the Government requires an inviting organization to make a written request to invite foreign clergy, including the dates and reason for the visit. Even if the visit is for nonreligious purposes such as charitable activities, representatives must obtain a visa and permission from the CRNA. The CRNA has 20 days in which to respond, and there is no provision for appeal of the CRNA's decision. Legislation restricts "subversive activities" by foreign organizations in the country and prohibits the establishment of offices of foreign organizations whose activities incite "national, religious and racial enmity" or could "have negative effects on the physical and mental health of the people."

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government increased its harassment of religious groups based not only upon the religion law but also on directives that provide additional rules and requirements for religious groups that are not outlined in the law.

According to official statistics, in the first 6 months of 2004 the CRNA registered 38 new religious communities, 7 of which were Protestant communities, as well as 9 religious organizations. However, during the period covered by this report, the CRNA continued to delay the registration of the Church of Scientology. At the end of

the period covered by this report, the still unregistered BAOB was preparing to submit documents for reregistration.

According to the Forum 18 News Service, on October 23 citing "crude violations" of the law in Nesvizh "predominately by Protestant communities" and the need to improve local officials' ability to "regulate the ethnic-confessional situation," Vladimir Lameko, Vice Chairman of the CRNA, ordered local officials to increase monitoring of the activity of religious organizations, carry out regular visits during worship services and meetings with religious leaders, and conduct regular checks on unregistered religious groups to terminate their activities. In addition Lameko ordered local officials to prevent the main Polish minority organization in the country from using property owned by the Roman Catholic Church, and to conduct "systematic work" with local Catholic leaders to ensure that foreign Catholic religious workers use Belarusian or Russian in their sermons. Following Lameko's order, representatives from the Union Evangelical Faith Christians and Baptist communities reported that teachers questioned children who belong to these churches about their attendance at religious ceremonies to determine which students were attending Protestant ceremonies.

With or without official registration, some faiths have encountered difficulty renting or purchasing property to establish places of worship, difficulty building churches (e.g., the Greek Catholics and Protestant groups), or openly training clergy.

Citizens theoretically are not prohibited from proselytizing and may speak freely about their religious beliefs; however, authorities often intervene to prevent, interfere with, or punish individuals who proselytize on behalf of some registered and unregistered religions. The Government continued to enforce a 1995 Council of Ministers decree that regulates the activities of religious workers. A 1997 Council of Ministers directive permits the teaching of religion at youth camps for registered religious groups.

Foreign missionaries are not permitted to engage in religious activities outside of the institutions that invited them. The law requires 1 year, multiple entry "spiritual activities" visas for foreign missionaries. According to the CRNA, in 2003 Belarusian religious associations invited 956 foreign religious workers, including 254 who arrived specifically to participate in religious activities. Despite these figures, religious groups continue to experience difficulties in obtaining visas, even those that have a long history in the country. As a result of its revival since 1991, the Roman Catholic Church has experienced a shortage of qualified native clergy. At times the Church has had difficulty obtaining permission from authorities to bring in a sufficient number of foreign religious workers, primarily from Poland, to make up for the shortage. Members of the Hare Krishna community continued to report that existing legislation prevents them from inviting foreign clergy to participate in religious activities with their community, and they have not applied for any foreigners to visit them in the country.

As a result of its agreement with various government agencies, the BOC is reportedly able to enjoy beneficial tax rates on land and property, while other faiths are not always able to do so. The Protestant community claimed that Protestant churches would lose their land and property tax benefits if they leased their spare property to others that are affiliated with their faith. Having a lease agreement is an indispensable condition to secure a legal address and subsequently apply for registration as a religious group or church. Similarly, unlike the BOC, Protestant churches have lost their land and property tax benefits in instances when buildings affiliated with a church have been constructed adjacent to one another on the same property.

According to the BAOB, local officials in the Minsk Oblast town of Primorye banned two BAOB priests from entering the city after they had illegally conducted religious services there. Approval for visits by foreign clergy or religious workers often involves a lengthy bureaucratic process. Internal affairs agencies may expel foreign clergymen from the country by not extending their registration or by denying them temporary stay permits. These authorities may make decisions on expulsion on their own or based on recommendations from Religious Affairs Councils, regional executive committees, or the Religious Affairs Department of the Executive Committee of the city of Minsk.

Since April 2003, Grodno city authorities have repeatedly denied the registration of a foreign rabbi because he does not speak Belarusian or Russian.

According to the Government, the law permits residential property to be used for religious services once it has been converted from residential use. The Housing Code permits the use of such property for nonresidential purposes with the permission of local executive and administrative bodies. Since 2000, local authorities have enforced this statute, effectively requiring all religious organizations to reregister their properties. Government figures indicated in 2002 that 110 religious communities, including 34 Protestant denominations, had their property registered through this process; however, authorities continue to deny permission to many Protestant churches, as well as other nontraditional faiths, which become caught in circular requirements. They are denied permission to convert their properties for religious uses because these groups are not registered religious groups. However, an organization must have a legal address to register. Religious groups that cannot register

often are forced to meet illegally or in the homes of individual members.

According to the CRNA, in 2003 there were 227 buildings built for religious purposes, including 42 buildings for use by Protestants. However, during the period covered by this report, many traditional and nontraditional religious groups continued to experience problems obtaining property, due to government efforts to restrict the ability of these groups to establish houses of worship. In December city authorities in Slonim pressured the director of a local meeting hall to cancel a rental contract he had made with the New Generation Full Gospel Church.

While Protestants and Greek Catholics reported that they had been able to rent space in meeting halls for religious services more successfully than in previous years, nontraditional religious groups continued to be denied space in meeting halls to conduct prayer services. According to the Association of Full Gospel Christians, during the period covered by this report Minsk authorities rejected at least five applications from the Church to rent space at a local meeting hall. During the same period, Protestants filed numerous requests to the CRNA to allow them to rent property to worship, most recently in June. In its responses, the CRNA claimed that only local authorities decide whether or not to grant such permission.

In 2003, local authorities rescinded an earlier decision to allocate property to a Pentecostal community in the town of Druzhnii, claiming that the group should first ascertain the public opinion of the town. Oblast authorities overruled the decision and local authorities have since offered the community three plots of land from which to choose. Authorities continue to deny permission to the registered New Life Evangelical Church to build a building to be used for religious purposes in Minsk. They first tried to build a church and then a social center, but they have been unable to do either.

In February, the reconstruction of a mosque in downtown Minsk that was razed during Soviet times commenced and is expected to be completed in 2005.

In 2002, local authorities in the Minsk Oblast town of Borovlyani refused to permit a registered Full Gospel community to renovate a privately built home into a church. Though the community had received all necessary permission from local authorities, the religious affairs office rejected the application outright. The CRNA office cited a letter it received from several Orthodox townspeople that accused members of the Full Gospel community of illegally entering homes to proselytize, stealing Orthodox crosses from those wearing them, and belonging to an unregistered "sect." The local BOC priest reportedly prepared the letter. Despite the group's appeal to the Procurator General to prove these charges, no investigation has occurred. As of June, the CRNA had yet to approve the church's renovation.

There were no reports of religious groups being evicted from property during the period covered by this report; however, authorities continued to break up unsanctioned religious gatherings in apartments.

A government decree specifies measures to ensure public order and safety during general public gatherings, which some meeting hall officials have cited as a basis for canceling or refusing to extend agreements with religious groups for the use of their facilities. According to the Forum 18 News Service, in March Minsk city authorities rejected a request by the Calvinist Reformed Church to conduct an international conference devoted to the 450th anniversary of the Church's founding in the country. The Church was reportedly informed by Minsk city authorities that the Church had no right to conduct an international conference since the organization was not registered as a republican religious association, despite the fact that the religion law enables religious organizations to invite foreigners to participate in meetings, pilgrimages, and other activities.

Although it is registered officially, the Greek Catholic Church has experienced problems with the Government because of historical tensions between it and the Orthodox Church and its emphasis on the use of the Belarusian language. While the Greek Catholic Church reported that it has been easier to rent facilities for worship than in previous years, their ability to conduct regular worship at these locations is restricted by the high financial costs for securing the proper permits.

While there were no reported publications of anti-Protestant articles in state-owned periodicals, state-owned periodicals continued to attack other nontraditional faiths. An article in the April 16 issue of Znamya Novosti printed an article titled "Are There Means to Save the Soul?" which describes the activities of destructive "sects" in Belarus. According to the article, there are around 370 "sects" in Belarus; among the most "dangerous" of which are the Unification Church, the "Church of Christ", and the Church of Scientology.

An article in the March 26 issue of the state-owned newspaper Minski Kurier printed information critical of adherents to the Unification Church and Hare Krishnas. The article claimed that in 1997, Hare Krishnas were designated as a "destructive totalitarian sect." According to a representative of the Hare Krishna community,

the authorities never made such a designation. After being confronted by the Hare Krishnas, the journalist of the article admitted that this false information was provided by the BKGB, something later confirmed by the BKGB.

In March 2003, the Ministry of Education released a textbook titled Religious Conduct for use in religious instruction that describes Hare Krishnas, evangelical Christians, and Scientologists as "neocults" and "sects." Although the book remained in use during the period covered by this report, there were no reports of any negative consequences against students adhering to these faiths. Man, Society, and State, another textbook promoting similar ideas, also remains in use in Belarusian schools. After conducting an examination of both books, the CRNA and the Ministry of Education determined that the use of the word "sect" was a "scientific" word, and did not label Hare Krishnas or Protestants as antisocial.

During the period covered by this report, the sale and distribution of anti-Semitic literature through state press distributors, government agencies, and at stores and events affiliated with the Belarusian Orthodox Church continued.

Despite a May 2003 order by the Prosecutor General and the Ministry of Information to remove the anti-Semitic and xenophobic newspaper Russki Vestnik, distribution of the newspaper resumed in February through the state-distribution agency Belzoyuzpechat. As in previous years, anti-Semitic literature continued to be sold at the National Academy of Sciences.

Anti-Semitic literature was openly sold during several Orthodox book fairs in Minsk, and at the House of Mercy, a BOC-established hospice in Minsk. The Roman Catholic Church reported that anti-Catholic literature is also sold at places linked to the BOC. Anti-Semitic and Russian ultranationalist newspapers and literature continued to be sold at Pravoslavnyaya Kniga (Orthodox Bookstore), a store that sells Orthodox literature and religious paraphernalia. While the literature sold at the store originates from Russia, many of the copies sold have been reprinted by Belarusian publishing houses. Pravoslavnyaya Kniga also distributed anti-Semitic literature during an October 25 meeting of the All Belarusian Cossacks' Association. In response to an appeal by a Jewish group to punish Pravoslavnyaya Kniga, the Procurator General launched an investigation into the incident to determine whether or not Pravoslavnyaya Kniga had illegally distributed literature that promoted intolerance. As of June, no decision had been announced. Although the BOC has stated that it maintains no ties with Pravoslavnyaya Kniga, employees of the store have maintained that Pravoslavnyaya Kniga is the official bookstore of the BOC.

According to the Roman Catholic Church, in April BOC clergy reportedly made several anti-Catholic statements during a nationally televised religious ceremony marking Orthodox Easter. The Roman Catholic Church has also expressed concern about the sale of anti-Catholic literature at events and stores linked with the BOC.

Despite the ongoing investigation into the activities of Pravoslavnyaya Kniga and assurances of various government officials that the sale of such literature was illegal, the government took no visible steps to stop the sale of xenophobic literature at Pravoslavnyaya Kniga or other locations.

Restitution of religious property remained limited during the period covered by this report. There is no legal basis for restitution of property that was seized during the Soviet and Nazi occupations, and the law restricts the restitution of property that is being used for cultural or educational purposes. Many former synagogues in Minsk are used as theaters, museums, sports complexes, and even a beer hall; most of the Jewish community's requests to have these synagogues returned have been refused. The few returns of property to religious communities have been on an individual and inconsistent basis, and local government authorities in general are reluctant to cooperate. Over the past several years, religious groups have lobbied the authorities successfully to return several properties in Minsk and other cities. According to the CRNA, religious organizations have the advantageous right to have religious property returned to them, except in cases when they are being used for cultural or sporting purposes. Official statistics indicate that from 1988-2003, the government returned over 1,120 buildings that belonged to various religious groups, including 709 to the BOC, 292 to the Roman Catholic community, 29 to the Old-Rite Believers, 12 to the Jewish community, 7 to the Protestant community, 3 to the Muslim community, and 1 to the Greek Catholic community. However, there were no reports that the Government had returned any former religious property to their previous owners during the period covered by this report.

Despite an October 2003 statement by President Lukashenko that the Government should not inhibit activities of the Jewish community, government officials continued to take a number of actions indicating a lack of sensitivity toward the Jewish community. Construction work continued at the site of a sports stadium in Grodno that had been originally built in the 1950s on the site of a former Jewish cemetery that existed since the 1600s. During the course of excavation, workers at the site found human remains, which were removed from the site to be collected for future reburial. Photographs taken by the Jewish community showed human remains, not only

mixed in earth filling dump trucks but also mixed with earth from the site which was used to resurface a road. After intense international pressure, Grodno Oblast Governor Vladimir Savchenko signed an agreement with a national Jewish leader in August 2003 that called for an immediate cessation of excavation activity but permitted the continued construction work at the site. In November 2003, Savchenko signed a second agreement with another national Jewish leader that called for the removal of remains that were mixed in with earth used to resurface a nearby road and the immediate cessation of excavation activity at the cemetery. Despite the fact that both agreements called for stopping excavation work at the stadium, excavation work continued at the site. In mid-June, the Grodno Jewish community reported that although excavation work had ended at the stadium, construction continued at the site.

In 2002, authorities in Mogilev decided to change the status of the city's Jewish cemetery, which authorities had officially designated as a Jewish cemetery in 2001, to a public cemetery. Under the 2001 agreement, Mogilev's burial service was obliged to allocate land for the expansion of the cemetery and not to bury anyone in the cemetery without the agreement of the local Jewish community. Despite having signed the agreement, local authorities permitted the removal of human remains and headstones from existing gravesites to make room for non-Jewish burials. Remains found during the digging were left on the ground. In June 2003, the local Jewish community sent an appeal to President Lukashenko to halt such activity. In February, the governor of Mogilev oblast restored the cemetery's status as a Jewish cemetery and ordered the burial service and city mayor to adhere to the 2001 agreement. However, according to the local community, as of June, the mayor had yet to implement this order, claiming that the Mogilev city council, which was on recess at the end of the period covered by this report, must approve the implementation of the order. In late June, the local Economic Crime Prevention Department, acting in response to an appeal by the local Jewish community, began an investigation into the legality of several burial permits issued for the cemetery. As of June 30 the investigation and the removal of remains and headstones from the cemetery continued.

On February 11, by order of the Ministry of Education, Belarusian State University closed the International Humanities Institute (IHI), which was an independent educational entity affiliated with BSU that was the only higher educational entity offering Judaica studies. IHI's various programs, including the Judaica program, were divided among several BSU faculties. Although the rector of BSU cited the break-up of IHI as part of an internal reorganization of BSU's programs, some Jewish groups expressed concerns that the move to liquidate the institute was motivated by Government retaliation for the August 2003 closure of the Israeli Embassy in Minsk and by a request of the Metropolitan Filaret who reportedly objected to the Judaica program. As of May, IHI's Judaica program continues to exist as part of BSU's curriculum but no longer as an autonomous institute.

During the period covered by this report, government officials continued to publicly make anti-Semitic statements. In a September 13 Associated Press article, Sergei Kostyan, Deputy Chairman of the International Affairs Committee of the lower house of parliament, rejected criticism of the installation of a gas pipeline near the site of a former Jewish cemetery in Mozyr, accusing Jewish persons of sowing "ethnic discord." During an October press conference, Information Minister Vladimir Rusakevich was quoted saying that the country needs to live with Russia like brothers but to bargain with Russia "like a Yid."

In 2002, authorities in Brest arrested and later released a 17-year-old for desecrating a Holocaust memorial.

According to the CRNA, the Committee regularly responds to all public expressions of xenophobia by notifying the relevant government agencies responsible for pursuing legal action against them; however, no such legal actions were observed during the period covered by this report.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

During the period covered by this report, the Government frequently took steps abusing the religious freedom of several religious groups.

Several Protestants were fined for illegally conducting and hosting religious services. According to the CRNA, convictions for such offenses were based on charges of either disturbing public order or illegally gathering without prior permission. The law allows people to gather to pray in private homes; however, it provides restrictions on holding rituals, rites, or ceremonies in such locations and requires prior permission from local authorities for such events.

On April 17, a court in Mozyr fined Leonid Martynovitch, Mikhail Krynets, and Vasili Bilas, three members of the unregistered International Union of Baptist Churches (IUBC), \$176 (380,000 rubles) each after they had congratulated patients at a local hospital during Easter.

On November 23, 2003, local militia in Novogrudok charged Yuri Denischik, a missionary of the Novogrudok

Association of Baptists with illegally leading a prayer service in a private home registered to the Association. During a search of the premises, a local official accompanying the militia accused Denischik of belonging to a "fascist sect." Denischik was later fined approximately \$15 (33,000 rubles).

On December 5, 2003, according to the Forum 18 News Service, Viktor Yevtyukhov, a member of the IUBC, was fined approximately \$40 (82,500 rubles) for conducting an unregistered religious ceremony in the town of Zamoshye. On December 23, Oleg Kurnosov, another member of the IUBC, was fined approximately \$8 (16,500 rubles) for engaging in similar activity in the town of Dubrovna. In February, another IUBC pastor was warned for conducting religious services in the town of Soligorsk. The same group was warned to cease all illegal religious activity by March 1.

The regime continued to harass BAOC members. On June 20, Minsk Oblast and CRNA officials reportedly warned a local BAOC priest to stop his efforts to reconstruct a former BAOC church in the town of Semkov Gorodok.

During the period covered by this report, authorities continued to harass, fine, and detain Hare Krishnas for illegally distributing religious literature. The group reported that authorities continued to deport foreign Hare Krishnas that are detained by police while distributing religious literature in Belarus ostensibly for visa infractions. Throughout the period covered by this report, Minsk city authorities repeatedly denied requests by Hare Krishnas to distribute religious materials in the city.

Following direct government pressure and harassment of their respective religious organizations, BAOC priest Yan Spasyuk and the Light of Kaylasa leaders Sergei Akadanav and Tatyana Akadanava left the country in 2003. In addition to the Akadanavs, several other members of the group left following continued government pressure. As a result of the departure of the group's members, and of continued fear of government harassment, the Light of Kaylasa officially dissolved during the period of this report.

During 2003, members of the Light of Kaylasa that were fined for their participation in unsanctioned demonstrations and protests have reported that authorities have threatened them with confiscation of property and additional legal charges should their fines go unpaid. Authorities also warned, threatened, and harassed their family members for payment. In March 2003, authorities forced the parents of one member of the group to pay the outstanding fine of their son. Members of the Light of Kaylasa reported being fired from their jobs due to their affiliation with the group. One member reported that she was fired because she was a "sektantka," member of a "cult." Local authorities told employees of one company that their company would be closed since the company's director was a member of the group.

On August 5, 2003, Minsk city authorities warned the New Life Church to cease conducting unregistered religious meetings.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, anti-Semitism and negative attitudes toward minority faiths continued. According to an October 2002 poll conducted by the Independent Institute for Social, Economic, and Political Studies, 57.7 percent of respondents favored equality between various religious groups, while 33 percent felt that the Orthodox Church should receive special government privileges. However, a poll conducted by the same organization in March indicated that only 32 percent of respondents trusted the Roman Catholic Church and only 13 percent trusted the Protestant churches.

Anti-Semitism and sentiment critical of minority faiths persisted during the period covered by this report. Jewish organizations continued to criticize the Government for failing to censure anti-Semitic statements by government officials, stop the sale of anti-Semitic literature, and protect cemeteries and Holocaust memorials. On August 27, 2003 unknown individuals firebombed a Minsk synagogue, causing minor damage. Although a police investigation was conducted, the perpetrators were not found. Valery Frolov and Vladimir Parfenovich, two deputies in the lower house of Parliament, visited the Minsk synagogue the following day and condemned the attack.

In March, a group of youths damaged 10 tombstones, 9 of which were Jewish, at a Bobruisk cemetery. The youths were caught by passers-by who took the youths to police. No charges were filed and the youths were released. In June, unknown individuals damaged several Jewish headstones at a cemetery in Cherven. On May 26, 2003, unknown individuals vandalized the Yama Holocaust memorial complex in Minska Holocaust memorial in the town of Timkovichi. In August 2002, unknown individuals vandalized a Holocaust memorial in Lida.

During the period covered by this report, unknown vandals continued to destroy crosses, both Orthodox and non-Orthodox, that were erected at Kuropaty, an area used by the NKVD to murder over 300,000 people in the 1930s. The authorities made no visible attempts to find those responsible.

According to the CRNA, oblast authorities nationwide are undertaking measures to prevent the vandalization of cemeteries. These measures include the erection of fences around cemeteries, tasking local law enforcement bodies with conducting regular patrols of cemeteries, and collecting and reporting of incidents of vandalization.

The Jewish community is concerned by the concept of a "greater Slavic union" that is popular among nationalist organizations active in the country, including the Russian National Union (RNU), which is still active despite officially dissolving in 2000, and the National Bolshevik Party, another Russian extremist organization. In January, RNU members in Gomel distributed anti-Semitic literature on city buses. This incident occurred the same month Jewish community centers in Gomel and Polotsk were vandalized with RNU graffiti. Authorities have launched investigations into these acts of vandalism.

During the period covered by this report, a website was created, purporting to be the website of the Jewish Orthodox Skinheads (JOSH), an organization supposedly made up of Jewish youths to combat anti-Semitism and xenophobia. Despite the "organization's" stated goals, the website calls upon Belarusian Jews to take provocative acts against the Government to support their cause and includes language defaming non-Jewish citizens of Belarus and prominent Belarusian Jewish leaders. Several Jewish leaders, all of whom consider the website to be offensive and provocative, have denounced the website, and have expressed their concerns to government authorities. The website includes a link to another website purported to be run by Hare Krishna skinheads.

The official Belarusian Orthodox prayer calendar, printed in Minsk, continues to mark May 20 as the anniversary of the 1690 death of Gavriil Belostoksky, a young child who is alleged to have been murdered by Jews near Grodno. The May 20 prayer for Belostoksky makes reference to Jewish persons as "real beasts" who allegedly kidnapped and murdered Belostoksky for religious purposes.

In April, local authorities in Brest oblast refused to initiate a criminal investigation into the burglary of an evangelical Christian church in the town of Khotislav that was burglarized in March. Since 2000, the church had reportedly been vandalized six times prior to the latest incident.

During the period covered by this report, the BAOC claimed that BOC clergy, accompanied by Minsk Oblast officials, visited several towns in Minsk oblast and called upon local villagers not to participate in BAOC religious services.

There is no indication that the BOC has changed its view that it will cooperate only with religious faiths that have "historical roots" in the country. Members of most non-BOC faiths have expressed their opposition to the religion law and have openly criticized the law's restrictions and vagueness. In July 2003, over 5,000 Protestants gathered in a Minsk city park to protest the religion law's passage. As of June, most of the major Protestant groups, with the exception of the Association of Full Gospel Christians, decided to seek reregistration.

In March, Protestant groups sent letters to President Lukashenko, the National Assembly, and the Constitutional Court to revise restrictive elements of the religion law. The Constitutional Court, although claiming that religious groups did not have the right to appeal to the Constitutional Court on this issue, acknowledged that certain articles of the law warranted further scrutiny to verify whether they violated the

constitution. The lower house of the National Assembly rejected the appeal, claiming that all of the religion laws articles were constitutional, contradicting the commentary of the Constitutional Court. As of June, the President had yet to respond to these and all previous appeals by Protestant groups to revise the law.

During the period covered by this report, the Government continued a program to replace existing Belarusian passports with new passports containing the holder's tax identification number. Believing that these numbers may include numbers associated with Satanism or other superstitious beliefs, many Orthodox citizens have reportedly refused to apply for new passports. In May Metropolitan Filaret, despite having previously announced that the inclusion of tax identification numbers does not contradict Christianity, sent an appeal to the Council of Ministers to establish an alternative identification system for those who refuse to get new passports. As of June 30, the government and BOC were working together to find an amicable solution to the issue.

Prior to the passage of the law on religion, representatives of many traditional and nontraditional religious faiths established the Civil Initiative for Religious Freedom. The group actively opposed the law on religion and other government restrictions on religious groups. In January the group published the second installment of the White Book, a collection of documents that detailed the Government's many abuses of religious freedom, information about the religion law, and copies of various reports about the religious freedom situation in the country.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Embassy staff maintained regular contact with representatives of religious groups, the Civil Initiative for Religious Freedom, and government officials responsible for religious affairs, and met with resident and visiting U.S. citizens of various religious faiths to discuss religious freedom issues in the country. In March representatives of Protestant, Jewish, and Hare Krishna communities participated in a 3-week Department of State International Visitors exchange program to the U.S. The participants traveled to several American cities and met with various government officials, representatives of American religious faiths, NGOs, and other organizations.

During meetings with various government officials and ministers, Embassy staff raised such issues as the religion law, the continued sale of intolerant literature at events and locations affiliated with the BOC, the ongoing dispute surrounding the Grodno Jewish cemetery and the liquidation of the International Humanities Institute. The Embassy closely monitored the continued sale of anti-Semitic and xenophobic literature at stores and events linked with the BOC and state media distributors. Throughout the period covered by this report, Embassy staff also visited the site of the Jewish cemetery in Grodno on several occasions and met with local officials and community leaders to discuss the situation. Embassy staff, including the Ambassador, attended several events hosted by various religious groups. The Embassy regularly discussed religious issues with representatives of foreign diplomatic missions in the country.

The Embassy continued to host roundtables of religious leaders to discuss relevant issues pertaining to religious freedom and government harassment. In February and March, visiting officials from the Department of State, including the Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs, met with representatives of several religious groups to ascertain the religious freedom situation. Embassy staff regularly met with visiting U.S. citizens interested in discussing religious freedom issues in the country.

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